

# International Women's Day 2022: An interview with Professor Arpana Verma

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## An Introduction

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Policy@Manchester is proud to have three exceptional academic co-directors – Professors Anna Scaife, Arpana Verma and Francesca Gains. In addition to being experts in their respective fields, Policy@Manchester's co-directors are staunch advocates for platforming academic expertise in policy conversations.

This year to celebrate International Women's Day, and to reflect on the specific role of women's voices in policy, we were fortunate enough to sit down with Professor Arpana Verma to get her views on this important topic and some of the issues that still require attention.



## An Interview with Professor Arpana Verma

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**Arpana is a Professor of Public Health and Epidemiology and the Head of the Division of Population Health, Health Services Research and Primary Care. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Arpana has worked on several systematic reviews and also worked to understand the issues carers and care homes face. She has also worked extensively on poverty alleviation, digital**

**literacy and digital exclusion. Arpana advocates for getting rid of tokenistic community participation and digging deeper into true community participation where citizens are in control.**

*Looking at your profile as a researcher, and the amount of projects and organisations you are involved with, is very impressive. Naturally, a lot of these projects lead to some policy engagement and at quite a high level too – it was interesting to see you mention that teaching is still a very important part of your career. A good or bad learning experience can often make or break women and girls' pathways into scientific or other traditionally male dominated careers, in your view what should we be doing to change this and is this something you feel strongly about?*

So I've always had equal research and teaching posts whilst I've been at the University, but before that I definitely had a lot of teaching when I was working at an acute trust and I've not really felt the issues of gender come up. I always had really good role models to look up to.

In terms of gender I think what we've experienced when teaching students in public health, medicine, nursing and other professions has been that, often, the majority of our students are female. What's been a complete career highlight, whether we're talking about undergraduate or postgraduate teaching, is when you see past-students years later and they go 'oh it's because of this lecture that I went into public health'. Half of my job is getting the new generation into public health epidemiology, seeing their careers progress and, hopefully, seeing a woman leading the research group, the teaching programme or the

division. This is where I hope people can see that they could be that person, from our CPD students through to our PhD programmes.

Everything that we do is about empowering an individual to take our teachings and to be able to do what they want to do going forwards, and empowering them to think that they can do it.

I think a lot of us suffer from imposter syndrome, but we've got so much literature and materials now to help support women who feel like that, and being able to really signpost students to the fact that we've all been there and still are sometimes! There is a real strength in coming together to discuss some of these thoughts and feelings and overcoming them is really important. **I always feel that whenever I talk about impostor syndrome it's mostly to students who are women and it's important to really develop their ability to think through why they might be feeling negative about their career choices and about their progression through the career pathways that they've chosen. I think that's as important as teaching somebody how to do a t-test or what a cohort study is.** It's so important that we get all these different components of why women perhaps are being held back, in the formats that are best out there to support them.

*When we speak about policy, public health in particular is something that will affect everybody at some point in their life. What do you think about the idea that having a greater diversity of voices in policymaking, or reviewing policy, helps to solve a lot of those issues that come up when one group, often with one experience, has implemented policy?*

I think that's a really important part of it as well. Empowering people to go into these areas and to talk truth to power. It's important and in terms of **'if we don't do it who's going to?'** It's a case of feeling like your contribution is important and I think we suffer from feeling that 'oh maybe it's not right, maybe other people are far more experienced, they know more than I do, they've got better understanding of all the issues' – well, no! I bet we've got a much clearer understanding of the issues that affect, especially women, not just our generation but across the generations. It's about thinking through how we can talk to policymakers so that they have a diverse group of voices that they can call on. Getting to know policymakers too so that you can build a relationship, because everything's about trust isn't it? Whether we're talking to communities, or policymakers, that that takes time. So if we can think through how to support women in science and it doesn't matter at what level, I think early career researchers and some of our students can make a huge impact on policy research all the way through to being on different committees or NGOs where they're looking at international policy. There's no limit to where people can actually be of benefit and if we can provide that through Policy@Manchester I think that's ideal.

*Finally, what changes in policy, or the process of policymaking, would you like to see happen to increase diversity and representation of women from all backgrounds?*

I think there are a group of people who already get their voices heard, but I feel like we need to scratch the surface and get a deeper understanding of the voices that sit below that.

This goes back to this whole proper citizen participation in policymaking because I think there's so many entry levels to policy. So **if we think about the health and wellbeing boards all the way to international policymaking there's a need for us to really**

**empower our women, especially in our communities, to think about how they influence what's happening by offering real-life evidence.**

I think social media has helped in terms of getting messages out there, but it's a dual edged sword and it comes with its own pitfalls. Fake news and how people start believing things that may not be true, but have been shared multiple times, feeds into the belief structures of different bits of our communities. This is a project that we're actually interested in and developing with the World Health Organisation at the moment and some partner local authorities. I think there's this need to empower people in our communities to influence policy and there's a need to empower people to fight fake news and myth bust and think about how we deal with even policymakers who might need to do a bit of myth busting themselves. Getting the right information to policymakers is so important, and it could very much come from an individual's experience and their thoughts as well as that population level approach too.

## About Policy@Manchester

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*Policy@Manchester aims to impact lives globally, nationally and locally through influencing and challenging policymakers with robust research-informed evidence and ideas. [Visit our website](#) to find out more, and [sign up to our newsletter](#) to keep up to date with our latest news.*

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